



Andrew Iuvale photo

This photo was taken aboard the USS Decatur of Samoan active duty Sailors from various commands in Hawaii. They are wearing replica FitaFita Guard uniforms for the April 2000 American Samoan Centennial.

American Samoa

A tribute to the FitaFita Guard

Story by JO3 Sunday E. Sawyer staff writer

American Samoa may be a small island in the South Pacific, but it has played a large role in the making of United States history. Every year on April 17, descendants of the first group of Samoan Sailors (who migrated to Hawaii in 1954) keep their history alive at Naval Station Pearl Harbor by reenacting the initial raising of the United States flag in American Samoa.

The ancestors of today's Samoan Sailors formed what is known as the FitaFita (pronounced feet-sa feet-sa) Guard in April 1900. The special force of village men provided a police service for Naval Station Tutuila in American Samoa.

Because there weren't enough sailors stationed at the naval base to provide adequate law and order to the land, Cmdr. Benjamin Tilley, the first U.S. Naval Governor of American Samoa formed the Guard.

Tilley also designed the uniform for the local "police force" and gave the force its name. The history of American Samoa and the important role the FitaFita Guard played in providing law and order during the naval days is recounted in lingering tales.

At the end of the 19th century, Germany, England and the United States almost went to battle over positioning in the South Pacific, but halted due to the loss of coal.

Each country wanted to build a coaling station somewhere between Hawaii and Australia. The United States felt that Samoa would be a prime location.

Ships from all three countries faced off in the battle for land, but met their demise when they literally ran out of steam - and coal. Completely depleted of fuel, the stranded ships were tossed about and destroyed by a hurricane.

Shortly thereafter, representatives from the three countries came to an agreement. In that agreement, the U.S. laid claim to Eastern Samoa now known as American Samoa, the smallest plot of land in the area.

Germany, which claimed the western part of the Samoan islands, and England, which claimed Fiji, Tonga and New Guinea, thought that they had an advantage over the United States, but Eastern Samoa actually housed the best port in the South Pacific, Pago Pago Harbor.

As a result, the people of Eastern Samoa received the protection they wanted, both from the U.S. Navy as well as the U.S. Constitution.

The United States, however, received more benefits than it expected. Two months after the United States flag was first raised on Samoa, Cmdr. Tilley realized that maintaining law and order throughout the islands would prove to be a large task with the small contingent of naval personnel stationed there.

He requested that a special force of village men be established to provide a police service. On June 13, 1900 his request was answered when the Navy sent recruiting officers to enlist young Samoan men for the FitaFita Guard.

For more than 50 years the guard policed the land as "landsmen" and enforced the laws over the naval station.

When the administration of American Samoa was transferred to the Department of Interior in 1951, the U.S. withdrew and the FitaFita Guard slowly disbanded. By that time, American Samoans had earned quite a reputation and the U.S. Navy did not want to lose a good supply of Sailors.

In 1954 recruiters were sent to American Samoa to enlist former and new FitaFita Guard members for the naval base at Pearl Harbor. There were approximately 100 recruits in the class of 1954, the first FitaFita Guard Sailors to relocate to Hawaii. The members of the Guard were subsequently assigned to San Francisco and other naval bases on the west coast.

Today Samoan sailors serve the Navy in all ranks and have made their home and the military very proud.



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Paramount Chief, former U.S. Congressman and FitaFita Guard member A.U. Fuimaono raised the United States flag during the centennial.



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Governor of American Samoa Sunia Tavese at the Centennial.



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Former Naval Station Pearl Harbor Sailor Damage Controlman Second Class (DC2) salutes during a flag raising ceremony at Pearl Harbor honoring the FitaFita Guard.



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American Samoa's police force wear their dress uniform to symbolize and honor the FitaFita Guard.